Head hopes Ashes rivals meet for post-series drinks

MELBOURNE: Opening batsman Travis Head hopes Australia and England will share a drink after the Ashes winds up in Sydney to revive a tradition that fell by the wayside after the 2023 series.

Players and staff from both teams routinely meet for drinks at the end of an Ashes series but extended farewells for several England players and staff prevented it at The Oval after the fifth Test in 2023.

Australia batter Head said he looked forward to the prospect of post-series drinks at the Sydney Cricket Ground, and that both teams had played the game "in the right way".

"There's definitely mutual respect," he said in comments published by *The Australian* newspaper on Wednesday. "I get along with a couple of them really well. There's some really good relationships with both teams.

"So, yeah, it'd be a nice moment. It's obviously nice going there knowing that we've won the series."

Australia lead the five-test series 3-1, having retained the urn with victory in the third Test in Adelaide.

Relations between the teams soured during the 2023 series due to a "spirit of cricket" furore after Australia wicket-keeper Alex Carey threw down the stumps in a controversial run-out of Jonny Bairstow.

Australia players were abused by England fans in the Long Room at Lord's, and England head coach Brendon McCullum told the BBC he could not imagine his team meeting the tourists for beers any time soon.

McCullum later changed his tune after England won the final test at The Oval by 49 runs to draw the series 2-2, saying England would meet the Australians.

It never happened, though, triggering criticism of England in some Australian media reports.

England captain Ben Stokes subsequently denied any snubbing of the Australians in a post on social media, saying his team's post-series wrap-up at The Oval had taken longer than expected due to player and staff farewells.

The fifth Test starts in Sydney on Jan 4.—Reuters

Australian cricket great Damien Martyn 'in induced coma'

SYDNEY: Former Australian Test batsman Damien Martyn has been rushed to hospital in an induced coma after being diagnosed with meningitis, media reports said Wednesday.

The 54-year-old, who played 67 Tests between 1992 and 2006 and 208 one-day internationals, was admitted on Boxing Day last week after falling ill while lying down.

Australian media said he was being treated for meningitis, which can be deadly.

Meningitis is an inflammation of the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord.

"He is getting the best of treatment," Test great and close friend Adam Gilchrist told The Australian newspaper.

"Amanda (his partner) and his family know that a lot of people are sending their prayers and best wishes."

Former Australian coach Darren Lehmann, a long-time team-mate of Martyn's, also sent support.

"Lots of love and prayers... keep strong and fighting, legend. Love to the family," he wrote on X.

Known as one of the game's great strokemakers, Martyn became a key figure in Steve Waugh's all-powerful Australian side, hitting 13 centuries and averaging 46.37.

He was also part of the Australia team that won the 2003 ODI World Cup, cracking 88 not-out in the final against India in a match-winning partnership with Ricky Ponting.

He retired in 2006 during the Ashes series and had kept a low-profile since.—AFP

SAO PAULO: Ethiopia's Muse Gizachew reacts after crossing the finish line to win the men's Sao Silvestre Run on Wednesday. Gizachew overtook Kenyan Jonathan Kipkoech in the last 10 metres, on the final stretch of Avenida Paulista, to take victory in the 100th edition of the 15km race held annually on New Year's Eve with a time of 44 minutes and 28 seconds. Kipkoech, who led most of the race, finished four seconds behind while Fabio Jesus of Brazil was third in 45.09. Tanzania's Sisilia Ginoka Panga won the women's race in 51 minutes and six seconds, finishing well ahead of second-placed Cynthia Chemweno of Kenya (52.30) and Brazilian Nubia de Oliveira Silva (52.42) in third.—Reuters

Two teams added to Quaid-e-Azam Trophy without BoG approval

By Mohammad Yaqoob

LAHORE: The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB), without the approval of its Board of Governors (BoG), has decided to allow two teams each — from Peshawar and Sialkot regions — to take part in the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy and Hanif Mohammad Trophy during the next season.

The BoG, which is the primary body for taking major cricket-related decisions in the country, includes representatives from regions as well as departments, and their input for any important matter is regarded as mandatory. However, the move to increase the number of participating teams in the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy — Pakistan's premier first-class event — without the BoG approval is significantly surprising.

The contentious decision to increase the number of QAT teams was taken during an online meeting held with the participating regions of the last edition of the Hanif Mohammad Trophy on Tuesday.

Earlier, in a similar way, the PCB raised the total number of teams of the previous Quaid-e-Azam Trophy from eight to 10, on the concluding day of the 2025 Hanif Mohammad Trophy in September.

Before the start of the season, the PCB had decided to allow only top six regions of the last season to compete in the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy while two outfits were to qualify from last year's Hanif Mohammad Trophy.

However, when the Hanif Trophy ended the same day, the PCB decided to raise the number of teams in the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy to ten but in a controversial manner.

The number of participating teams were raised also to ensure participation of at least one team from Karachi Region in the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy as no team of this region could qualify from the Hanif Mohammad Trophy to the next tier — Quaid-e-Azam Trophy -- as Fata and Faisalabad topped their respective groups.

However, the PCB in its first U-turn conveyed a message to all the regional bodies:

"Thanks to the Chairman PCB, approval for promotion of four teams this year has been granted on the request of the DDCO (Director Domestic Cricket). This year four teams, top two teams from each pool, shall be promoted to QAT and there will be relegation of two teams for the next Hanif Mohammad Trophy," the PCB said.

"According to this decision, besides Fata and Faisalabad as top teams of their respective groups, along with second best Karachi Blues and Lahore Blues were to qualify for the QAT," it added.

However to one's surprise, a message from the PCB, issued the next day, stated: "Fata, Karachi Blues, Faisalabad and Multan qualified for QAT under [the] new ruling [excluding Lahore Blues]. Thanks to the Chairman PCB, approval for promotion of four teams this year has been granted on the request of DDCO. This year two teams from each pool shall be promoted to QAT.

"Additionally, the remaining two teams will qualify on the basis of points/combined collectively. There will be relegation of two teams for the next Hanif Mohammad Trophy."

Interestingly, Peshawar and Sialkot included two players each as guests in the last season of the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy.

For Sialkot, Mohammad Hasnain and Mehran Mumtaz participated as guest players while for Peshawar Sufyan Muqeem and Razaullah were the guest players as both the regions could not finalise one complete team.

A regional president, on the condition of anonymity, told Dawn that two major and traditional regions -- Karachi and Lahore – have held the rights of fielding two teams each for these tournaments since long, mainly because both produced several prominent players for Pakistan's national team for seven decades. Moreover, he insisted, both the regions have won the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy title several times.

"This PCB decision is also against the ICC rules on discrimination among its member countries under which the two votes each of Australia and England were disallowed in 1993 to maintain indiscrimination among the members," the president told *Dawn*.

"Multan and Faisalabad are also important [cricketing] regions, compared to both Peshawar and Sialkot, but they are [being] allowed only one team [each]. So it is not good for cricket if the ICC rules are not being followed if indiscrimination and disparity among the member countries are to be considered," he added.

Spinner Rashid to lead Afghanistan in Twenty20 World Cup

KABUL: Ace spinner Rashid Khan will lead a strong Afghanistan squad announced on Wednesday for next year's Twenty20 World Cup.

Rashid's spin partner Mujeeb Ur Rahman and fast bowler Fazalhaq Farooqi have also been recalled to the 15-member squad for the tournament in India and Sri Lanka.

All-rounder Gulbadin Naib and fast bowler Naveen-ul-Haq, returning after a shoulder also found places in the squad.

Naveen last played in a T20I for Afghanistan against Zimbabwe in December 2024.

Afghanistan Cricket Board chief executive Naseeb Khan said the team can improve on their semi-final finish in the last World Cup in the United States and West Indies two years ago.

"Afghanistan had a terrific run in the previous T20I World Cup and we hope for even better results this year, which will be played in Asian conditions," Naseeb said in a statement.

Afghanistan beat New Zealand, West Indies, Australia and Bangladesh on their way to the semi-finals two years ago.

They will play West Indies in a three-match T20I lead-up series in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) ahead of the World Cup.

Rashid's side is placed in Group 'D' alongside New Zealand, South Africa, the UAE and Canada in the 20-team tournament that starts in India and Sri Lanka from Feb 7.

Afghanistan start their campaign against New Zealand in Chennai on Feb 8.

Squad: Rashid Khan (captain), Ibrahim Zadran, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Mohammad Ishaq, Sediqullah Atal, Darwish Rasooli, Shahidullah Kamal, Azmatullah Omarzai, Gulbadin Naib, Mohammad Nabi, Noor Ahmad, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, Naveen-ul-Haq, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Abdullah Ahmadzai.—AFP

Mbappe suffers knee sprain in blow for Real

MADRID: Real Madrid on Wednesday said that Kylian Mbappe had suffered a knee sprain, delivering a blow to their bid to reel in Liga leaders Barcelona.

"After the tests carried out today on our player Kylian Mbappe by Real Madrid's medical services, he was diagnosed with a sprain in his left knee. Awaiting evolution," the club said in a statement.

Real Madrid did not indicate how long the 27-year-old striker would be out for, but a source close to the France superstar told AFP that he would be absent for at least three weeks.

Mbappe, the leading scorer in La Liga this season with 18 goals, is therefore a major doubt for Sunday's league match at home to Real Betis, Los Merengues' first after the winter break as they trail Barcelona by four points.

He could also miss the Spanish Super Cup semi-final against arch-rivals Atletico Madrid in Saudi Arabia on January 8, as well as a league fixture against Levante and a Champions League clash with former club Monaco.

Real did not say when or how Mbappe was injured, however he had trained with the team on Tuesday.

He underwent an MRI scan on Wednesday.

Mbappe has enjoyed a stellar 2025, equalling Cristiano Ronaldo's club record 59 goals in a calendar year, and has at times carried Real Madrid, relieving some pressure on under-fire coach Xabi Alonso.

He has scored 73 goals in 83 matches for Real since making a free transfer move to the Spanish giants from Paris St Germain 18 months ago.

He finished top scorer in La Liga last season with 31 goals — four more than Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski — and is currently seven goals clear of the next best this season, Barca's Ferran Torres.

His absence adds to those of Real defenders Daniel Carvajal, Eder Militao, Trent Alexander-Arnold, midfielder Federico Valverde, and forward Brahim Diaz who is at the Africa Cup of Nations with Morocco.—AFP

Probables invited to national hockey camp

LAHORE: Thirty-four probables have been invited to attend the national hockey team camp in Islamabad from Jan 5 to 31 to finalise the Pakistan squad for the participation in the FIH Pro League Season to be held in Hobart, Australia from Feb 10 to 15.

The camp will be held at the Naseer Bunda Stadium in Islamabad.

Probables: Goalkeepers: Abdullah Ishtiaq, Muneeb-ur-Rahman, Waqar, Ali Raza, Faizan Janjua, Bilal Khan; Defenders: Sufyan Khan, Mohammad Abdullah, Hammad-ud-Din, Abdul Manan, Emmad Shakil Butt, Usama Bashir, Arbaz Ahmad, Abu Bakar Mahmood, Moeen Shakeel, Zakriya Hayat, Ghazanfar Ali, Arshad Liaqat, Junaid Manzoor, Salman Razaq, Nadeem Khan, Mohibullah; Forwards: Abdul Hanan Shahid, Abdur Rahman, Afraz, Rana Wahid, Rana Walid, Ahmad Nadeem, Mohammad Emmad, Abdul Qayyum, Basharat Ali, Umair Sattar, Hamza Fayyaz, Abuzar, Rafiullah.—Sports Reporter

'Sincaraz' set to dominate as 2026 tennis season kicks off

SYDNEY: Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner are set for more world domination in 2026, starting at the Australian Open, while Aryna Sabalenka is bubbling with confidence as she chases further Grand Slam success.

The new season gets under way on Friday with the mixed-teams United Cup in Perth and Sydney, headlined by women's world number two Iga Swiatek and men's world number three Alexander Zverev.

Top-ranked Sabalenka, who is pursuing a third Melbourne Park trophy, starts at the Brisbane International from Jan 4-11 in a stellar field also boasting Australian Open champion Madison Keys and fourth-ranked Amanda Anisimova.

Alcaraz and Sinner, or "Sincaraz" as they have been dubbed, play an exhibition in South Korea on Jan 10 in their only warm-up before the Australian Open eight days later.

While Spanish sensation Alcaraz bumped his Italian rival from the season-ending world number one spot, Sinner had the last laugh by edging him to retain his ATP Finals title in Turin.

It capped a stellar year in which Sinner retained his Australian Open crown and added a landmark triumph at Wimbledon among six titles, despite missing three months over a doping ban.

"I feel like a better player than last year," said Sinner after completing his 2025 campaign with 58 wins and just six defeats.

"A lot of wins and not many losses. And in the losses I had, I tried to see the positive thing and tried to use it to evolve me as a player."

Alcaraz was similarly dominant, clocking a 71-9 win-loss record with eight titles including the French Open and US Open.

But he is yet to go beyond the quarter-finals at the Australian Open, losing to Novak Djokovic in the last eight in 2025.

It is the only Slam missing from his resume and the 22-year-old will start afresh with a new coach after his shock split from Juan Carlos Ferrero, who mentored him since he was 15.

DJOKOVIC LAST HURRAH?

Djokovic begins what could be his last year on tour at the Adelaide International starting on Jan 12, still chasing an elusive record 25th major crown and 11th Australian Open title.

Now 38, he has had to settle for a secondary role since Sinner and Alcaraz took control of the men's tour, making the semis at all four majors in 2025 but not going further.

"I can do only as much as I can do," he admitted after defeat at the US Open. "It will be very difficult for me in the future to overcome the hurdle of Sinner or Alcaraz in a best-of-five in a Grand Slam."

Since his last Slam title, in 2023 at the US Open, Alcaraz or Sinner have shared all eight majors.

A resurgent Felix Auger-Aliassime, Taylor Fritz and Alex de Minaur, ranked five, six and seven respectively, all feature at the United Cup, while Daniil Medvedev and a returning Nick Kyrgios play in Brisbane.

Sabalenka heads into the new season as undoubted world number one, having collected a second US Open title while also winning events at Brisbane, Madrid and Miami.

The Belarusian is favourite for a third Australian Open crown and fifth Slam title, although the likes of Swiatek, Coco Gauff and Elena Rybakina will have something to say.

"The Australian Open is very special to me," said Sabalenka, who lost a three-set thriller to Keys in the 2025 decider and heads to Australia after losing the controversial "Battle of the Sexes" clash to Kyrgios in Dubai.

"Winning it twice gives me confidence, but every year brings a new challenge. I'm excited to return and see what I can achieve."

Challenging her on Pat Rafter Arena in Brisbane will be Keys, along with fellow top-10 stars Rybakina, Anisimova, Jessica Pegula and Mirra Andreeva.

Swiatek leads Poland in Sydney at the United Cup, again teaming up with Hubert Hurkacz in their quest for revenge after being beaten by Team USA in the final in 2025 and Germany a year earlier.

The United States are spearheaded by Gauff and Fritz, while four-time major winner Naomi Osaka plays the event for the first time, representing Japan.—AFP